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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenge of teaching online classes to students who have difficulty with organization and time management. Online learning is far removed from the traditional classroom learning rubric. Online education requires students to navigate a multi-layered information path. The first step toward student preparation is to assess technological skill levels. If the institution does not have minimum proficiency requirements for those enrolling in an online course, it is up to the instructor to determine the students' abilities. This paper recommends creating a treasure hunt that requires students to perform tasks such as subscribing to a listserv and leaving a message on a message board. The author suggests that instructors make time for contact and individual instruction with students who cannot complete the tasks. The next step is preparing students to manage all of the information they will be dealing with in the course. Assuring that students feel connected to the instructor, each other, and the course content enhances the online learning experience. Feedback is the key to connecting with the instructor. (Contains a list of 19 resources and Web site addresses.) (NB)

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Coming and Going In All Directions: Preparing Students for Online Learning

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COMING AND GOING IN ALL DIRECTIONS: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR ONLINE LEARNING

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(Presented online at the 1999 Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference: "Best Practices in Delivering, Supporting, And Managing Online Learning.")

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is a challenge for the most organized and motivated students among us. For those of us who are organizationally and time management challenged it can be a frustrating experience. In the "old days" of traditional classroom learning, information came at you from texts, interpreted through teachers and relayed back through classroom discussions and testing. Even with the occasional supplemental video, it was a nice, predictable path. In online learning, information comes and goes in all directions. Often students are overwhelmed and learning can suffer. But, with a little help and support, everyone can learn to manage information in an online learning environment. This presentation will offer recommendations for preparing students to navigate the multi-layered information path.

THE NEED FOR STUDENT PREPARATION

For the most part, students involved in online learning have voluntarily chosen to participate in the environment (Moore & Kearsley). However, the truth may very well be that they had few other choices. The responsibilities of work and family can narrow their options. As more and more colleges cooperate in their course offerings, online learning may become the only choice for a desired or required course. Students enrolled in online courses may not be the motivated, organized, autonomous students who can handle the online experience well (Schlosser and Anderson). Still, we cannot deny them the best learning experience possible. As instructors, we need to teach all of the students, not just those who are easy to teach. Preparing students for online learning will allow all students the same opportunity for learning in this environment.

As time goes on, more and more students will enter higher education equipped with the skills needed for a successful online learning experience. For now, especially in our community colleges, we must be prepared to teach students whose skills leave something to be desired. We must commit time and energy to preparing them for a successful online learning experience.

ASSESSING STUDENT SKILLS

It is important to know just what students can and can't do before they begin. This is especially true if the course

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requires students to follow the same path together. We must set a pace that keeps the course moving. We must bring slower students up to speed so as to not hold back those whose skills are more advanced. (This sounds a lot like the traditional classroom, doesn't it?)

So, the very first thing to do in student preparation is to assess the skill levels of the students as they pertain to the technology. Some institutions set minimum proficiency standards before allowing students even to register for online courses. Others have mandatory training sessions for students. Many simply offer courses online to any student who has access to the Internet and is willing to participate. The odds are pretty good that this is the case in your institution. If so, you will have to determine your students' abilities when it comes to handling information in an asynchronous, multilevel learning environment.

How do we do this? Well, there are many good ideas out there and it is strongly recommended that you explore the options in the list of resources at the end of this presentation. Of course you'll want to send the usual introductory material concerning email etiquette, chat room protocol, etc, and you may include a survey designed to assess skills along with that. But students may not answer truthfully for a number of reasons, or they may not know enough even to answer correctly. My suggestion is that you set up a sort of "treasure hunt" as described below. You can set a list of required tasks that must be completed by a date prior to the start of class. Make sure to allow time for contact and individual instruction for students who cannot complete all of the tasks. Also be sure that each task includes some feedback to the instructor that either verifies its completion or requests assistance.

For instance, you can...

- Require students to subscribe to a listserve you will use for the class and post a message you suggest.
- Include the location of a message board and require students to leave a message there that you can check. This would be a good time to provide a reminder of the protocol for message boards such as indicating the subject matter and keeping the message short.
- Ask students to send a simple email message and attach a .txt file containing the name of their ISP and the answers to some questions about their ISP such as; Is it a long distance call? Are there times when access is difficult because of busy signals? (This information will be valuable when setting up chat times).
- If using MOO to conduct real time chat sessions, ask students to relate an experience they've had at a session in an email to you that is cc'd to other students whose addresses you provide. Not only will you know if students can send copies of emails to multiple addresses, you will also know who will need help

with MOOing. You can recommend students with experience "talk" via email to students with little or no experience. This interaction is good for the class as well.

- Include the URL of a web page you design with data fields for students to fill in pertinent information about their computer. This information can be processor speed, modem speed, anything specific you may require for graphic or video presentations, etc. Make sure to set a deadline for visiting the site that will allow you to make adjustments in your course if necessary.
- Have students create a folder in their email program dedicated to your class and file the introductory messages in that folder. You can require that they email you a message either containing the name they chose for the folder or a request for help in completing this step. If you allow a personal choice of ISP, providing help may mean referring them to their ISP for support. However, if other students have the same ISP, you may suggest that students support each other. This, again, is a good way to initiate interaction between students.
- Include a short introductory statement about yourself and require that the student copy and paste the statement in an email to you. Copying and pasting information is a valuable tool for managing information online and this will verify that students know where these functions are found in their email program. Again, assistance with the particular ISP may be needed from the ISP support or from other students with the same ISP.

KEEPING TRACK

Once we establish the students ability to send and receive information on all of the paths associated with online learning, we have to prepare them to manage this information. Sorting and filing are important skills to master in an online course. The copy and paste functions are valuable tools here.

Information sent and received in online courses should be accessible to students when they are offline. To accomplish this, information from web pages, email transmissions, chat room logs, message boards, etc., can be copied and pasted into documents in whatever word processing software the student has available. We can instruct our students to create documents with titles relevant to topics in the course and to copy and past pertinent information in these documents. Students should include a heading before each entry with the source such as *email from Student X on 2/18/99* or *web page at http://xxx.xxx.com* . Most word processing programs also have a "find"

function that allows for a search for a key word. This is an advantage over saving every email transmission or downloading entire web pages for review.

Filing email in folders created for specific topics also helps to keep the student from being overwhelmed with transmissions from the instructor, other students, listserves and newsgroups. We should encourage students to sort through their email once or twice a day. The consequences are the same as if they allow their snail mail to pile up -- clutter and confusion. We need to reduce that whenever and wherever possible.

Bookmarks are another valuable tool for managing information. Downloading can cause clutter on the students computer that slows things down. It also takes time to search through downloaded files to find information. Encourage students to use bookmarks and, if given the choice, to name the bookmark with a title relating to the information on the page. Creating effective titles or subject lines is a learned art, but a rewarding one.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

It is important to help students in the online learning environment feel "connected" to the instructor, each other, and the course content (Barron, 1987). These connections enhance the traditional classroom learning experience and their value is magnified in this environment.

Feedback is the key to connection with the instructor. Each email received should be acknowledged that same day. A simple reply with the message "mail received, will respond ASAP" lets the student know that the email went to the right place and gives the instructor time to sort through and prioritize messages later. It is a good habit to check messages several times a day, responding and filing all messages for consideration or action during a designated time. It also helps to remind students that the subject line of an email is important. If the message is time sensitive, students should indicate that in the subject line, just as the instructor should in messages to students.

Connection to other students taking the course need not only be in organized group activities. In a traditional classroom, students interact before, during, and after class. An initial get together in the chat room environment you will use for the class will not only allow you to work out any problems before hand, but also allow for student introductions in real time instead of dry, introductory emails. Conversation between students can be very revealing for the instructor as well. We can encourage sidebar conversations and email between students to help establish connections and encourage discussion. Many students are more open in the online environment than they would be in a traditional classroom setting and, despite concerns to the contrary, can be even more connected to their classmates.

Connection to the course material is something we must encourage students to make for themselves. By encouraging this connection in our group activities and discussion questions, we can make the material relevant. When online course content is connected to the student, it is real even if it is not as tangible as a hard copy.

CONCULUSION

Online learning will be an integral part of the future of education. In many cases, students entering higher education will be more experienced in the environment than their instructors. We must not exclude those students who are not as experienced. Preparation is the key to any successful venture. The importance of preparing students to handle information in this environment cannot be overstated.

I have included a list of resources at the end of this presentation. Each of them has contributed to the presentation in some way. But the foundation of the presentation is my personal experience on both sides of online learning. As a student in an online learning environment, I had to learn to deal with information coming and going in all directions. I soon learned that online learning required a rethinking of the way I managed information and a fresh approach to learning. This is a good thing. The suggestions and recommendations included in this presentation are designed to help students realize just how much of a good thing it is.

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LINKS

Distance Learning Resources http://www.luzerne.edu/homepages/mwishnefski/dist.htm
Educational Technology Strategies http://www.learner.org/edtech/

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Journal of an Online Student http://www.att.com/learningnetwork/virtualacademy/journal.htm
Open and Distance Learning Critical Success Factors http://tecfa.unige.ch/~tognotti/confmo.html
Orientation for the Distance Student, Franklin University http://online.franklin.edu/pf100-01/indes.htm
RIDE-Resources in Distance Education http://ccism.pc.athabascau.ca/html/ccism/deresrce/de.htm
Strategies for Learning at a Distance http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/dist9.html

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